

-----  
Title: The Founding of the Guards of Order, Pt. I

Author: Sherry the Mouse  
-----

"'Tis time to press  
harder, Blackthorn."  
The man who spoke stood  
over a heavy oaken table,  
one thin lock of golden  
hair braided hanging long  
over his shoulder, losing  
itself in the heavy gold

braid on his surcoat. His  
hands were planted flat  
on the table, fingers  
splayed over a map, and  
his strong arms framed  
the twisting silver  
serpent embroidered on  
his chest. As he spoke  
his eyes traced over the  
faded brown ink on the  
map, engaging in a mental  
journey across the fields  
and then the mountains  
of the Serpent's Spine. I  
could not see the map  
clearly from where I sat,  
but I did note his eyes  
dwelled overlong on a  
particular pass in the  
mountains.

"I fear this is a mistake,  
my lord," Lord Blackthorn  
said, shaking his head  
sadly. "Surely the problem  
cannot be as bad as thou  
describest it."

"But it is!" Lord British  
said forcefully, pushing  
away from the table, and  
turning around to look  
out the casement at the  
gently drifting snowfall.  
As Blackthorn bowed his  
head in acquiescence, the  
ruler continued in a lower  
voice, "The dead this  
year, Blackthorn. All  
those people whose  
families live without joy

this winter. The food  
that shall not be brought  
to table, the shops that  
shall not open. This  
children without parents  
and the parents without  
children. Think of the  
dead, and think of the  
funeral processions we  
have seen. Look you!"

Blackthorn came to stand  
beside his liege at the  
window, squinting out past  
the white snowflakes,  
over the moat, to the  
small blacksmithy on the  
northern side of Britain.  
Just as every day of  
late, a funeral procession  
wended its dark way  
across the cobblestones,  
figures hunched against  
the cold and the vagaries  
of fate. He rested a  
hand on his friend's  
shoulder.

"This will not bring back  
their dead, my lord," he  
said softly.

Lord British slammed a  
fist against the wall. "No,  
it will not. But perhaps  
it can bring the killers  
to justice!"

Blackthorn turned away.  
"Justice, what is justice?  
Thou dost propose to  
cover murder with a  
veneer of law. Already  
one hears reports of  
pickpockets lynched in the  
streets, so scared is the  
populace. Now thou  
choosest to sanction their  
doings."

"But only against the  
murderers, Blackthorn!"

British turned back to  
the table. "Look ye at  
this document I have  
drawn up defining the new  
law. Read it close and  
tell me that it will not  
serve."

With a sigh, Blackthorn  
pulled a chair to the  
table and began to read  
over the crabbed writing,

while British strode  
vigorously to the great  
hearth and held his hands  
out to be warmed by the  
huge fire blazing therein.  
"Tis unseasonably early  
for snow, is it not?" he  
said. "A harvest moon and  
snowfall every day for  
days now, yet the  
temperatures are not low  
enough for it to  
accumulate." And indeed it  
had been cold of late,  
for I shivered even when  
in my cozy home.  
Blackthorn agreed  
distractedly. "Some say  
that it is a omen,  
actually," he said, finishing  
the draft of the new  
law. "This..." he said,  
tapping the parchment.  
Yes?" Lord British said,  
looking eagerly and  
expectantly at his friend.  
Blackthorn sighed. "I am  
reluctant to admit it, but  
it will serve thy purpose."  
"Excellent, then we shall  
proclaim it as law: that  
citizens of Britannia may  
hunt down those who have  
murdered too many, and  
may claim a bounty  
confiscated from the  
killer's wealth."  
"But," Blackthorn said.  
Lord British arched one  
golden brow, and a smile  
quirked his lips.  
Blackthorn stood. "This  
business of a new order  
of guards... I mislike it  
indeed."  
"Bah," Lord British said,  
dismissing the concern  
with a wave of his hand.  
"Tis merely a new order  
of knights."  
"Dismiss me not," Lord  
Blackthorn warned, his  
voice growing tight with  
anger. "Didst thou think  
to slip yet another law  
enforcing thy 'virtues'?  
Thou knowest how I, and  
many of the populace,

feel about this issue!"

British grew angry,  
striding over to the  
table. "The Virtue Guards  
will be drawn from the  
best of those we have,  
and they will serve as  
examples to the rest of  
the people."

"By peeking into windows  
to see who is humble?

And by killing those they  
feel are unjust? What  
sort of guard is this?

Thou dost propose to tell  
the people how to think,  
and how to behave!"

British gripped the back  
of the chair before him  
so tightly his knuckles  
were as white as the  
snow whirling outside. "Is  
that not the role of  
government, Blackthorn?  
To teach the people how  
to behave?"

Blackthorn pushed away  
from the table, and  
stood. The figure he cut  
was dramatically different  
from that of Lord

British. His hair was dark  
and closely cropped, and  
his beard dark as well; in  
his robes he stood like a  
shadow against the  
whiteness of the  
casement behind him.

Behind Lord British there  
roared a blazing fire, and  
behind Blackthorn a  
winter storm. "Thou art  
not the parent of every  
person in Britannia,  
milord," he said coldly. "If  
thou dost persist in  
mothering everyone, they  
will simply rebel."

There they stood, gold  
against black, until Lord  
British said softly, "Has  
it come to this, my  
friend?"

Blackthorn's eyes widened,  
then narrowed again. "Do  
not presume on our  
friendship, my liege. We  
discuss a matter of

state."

Lord British ducked his head as if something pained him. "Do we? So be it. Tomorrow I shall proclaim that any who have the required character may apply to join the Virtue Guards. They shall be given a shield with mine own emblem, the silver serpent, so that they may stand for what is good and honorable in this world. Any who shame the emblem shall have it stripped on the spot. And I shall also proclaim the law on bounty hunting." Blackthorn stormed away from the table. At the heavy door he stopped, and turned back. Lord British did not even raise his head.

"Tomorrow then shall I announce that those same folk whom thou mightest take for thy new guard may choose instead to wear my emblem, and server as guards of the virtue of Chaos."

British looked up at him, eyes afire. "Be careful where thou treadest, Blackthorn. A private army..."

"Nay, my lord," Blackthorn said unctuously. "Merely so they may serve as an example of my beliefs, and of the beliefs of those who feel grown up enough to make their own decisions about right and wrong. Those who are sick of overzealous guards who slaughter the petty criminal at the slightest provocation, and sick of the paternalism in thy government."

Lord British glared at him, and there they stood, caught between free will and civilization. I

huddled where I sat,  
perched on the mantel,  
and prayed neither saw  
me in their anger, for a  
mouse has little strength  
and there was no easy  
route of escape.

"Rumors fly," Lord British  
said suddenly. "Some say  
that we think too far  
apart, and that balance is  
needed. Some speak of a  
city founded for that  
purpose, a city of  
Balance, hidden deep in  
the mountains, where the  
wind blows."